

# Course sample

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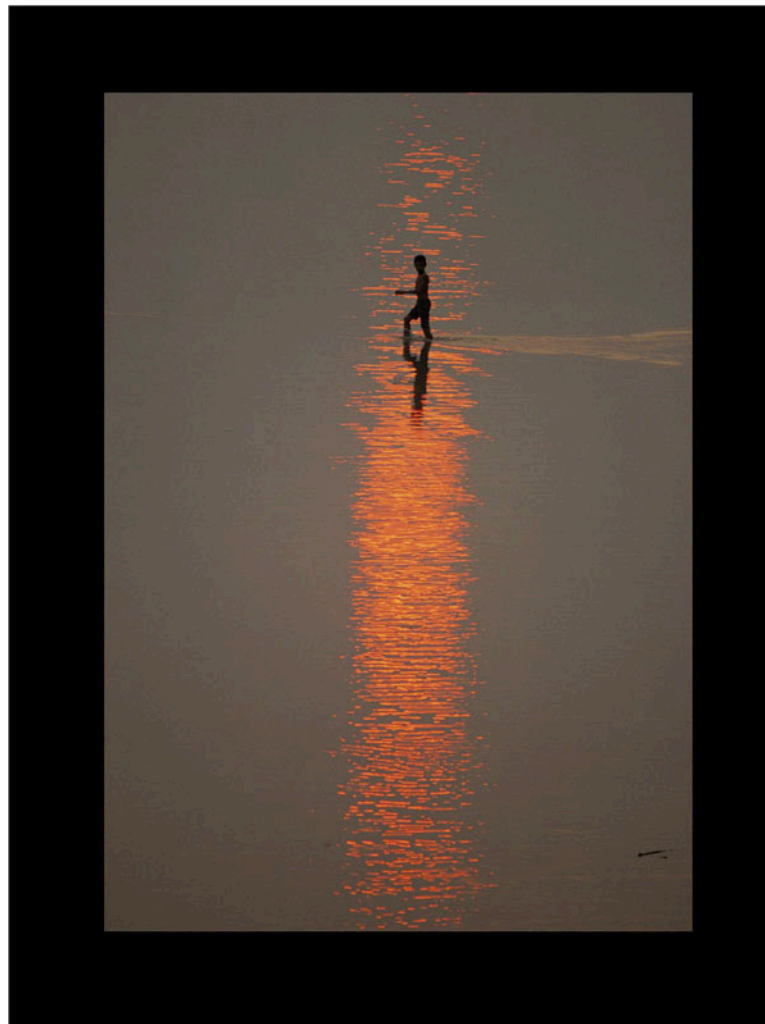
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[enquiries@oca-uk.com](mailto:enquiries@oca-uk.com)



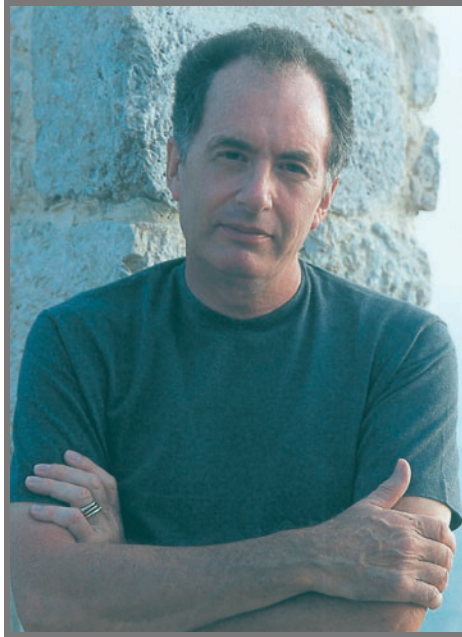
# **Photography 3: Your Own Exhibition**

**Written by  
Michael Freeman**



**Level HE6 - 60 CATS**

## About the author



Michael Freeman is one of the world's most highly respected professional photographers. He is widely published, with more than 80 books to his credit including *Spirit of Asia*; *Angkor: Cities and Temples* (both Thames and Hudson); *Japan Modern* (Mitchell Beazley) and *Sudan: The Land and the People* (Thames and Hudson). He has worked on commissions for many well-known publishing clients, including *Time-Life*, *Reader's Digest*, *Condé Nast Traveller* and *GEO*, and was for many years the principal photographer for the *Smithsonian Magazine*.

His instructional books on photography include the classic *35mm Handbook* (over 1.5 million copies sold) and *The Complete Guide to Digital Photography*, now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition and in 13 languages.

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# 1: The continuing importance of composition

## Introduction

Perhaps the most fundamental skill in photography remains the ability to organise a coherent image in the viewfinder frame out of the chaos of real life. Henri Cartier-Bresson, arguably the greatest reportage photographer of all time, whose timing and what he called 'geometry' were *impeccable*, wrote, '*Composition must be one of our constant preoccupations,*' and '*The photographer's eye is perpetually evaluating. A photographer can bring coincidence of line simply by moving his head a fraction of a millimetre ... he composes a picture in very nearly the same amount of time it takes to click the shutter, at the speed of a reflex action.*' Ansel Adams, another master, from a different genre, that of formal landscape, had this to say: '*For photographic compositions I think in terms of creating configurations out of chaos, rather than following any conventional rules of composition.*'

Composition is essentially organisation, the ordering of all the possible graphic elements inside the frame. This is basic design, and fundamentally photography has the same needs in this respect as any other graphic art. The danger is the same also - that the detailing of techniques can easily be read as a dogmatic set of rules. So, it is especially important to treat basic design as a form of enquiry, an attitude of mind, and a summary of the resources available. It is not a quick fix.

The principles of design in photography are to an extent different from those in painting and illustrations, because of the nature of the process - and in particular the instant creation of the image with the shutter release, rather than a slow building up of paint or lines. The two most fundamental

principles are contrast and balance. Contrast stresses the differences between graphic elements in a picture, whether it is contrast of tone, colour, form or whatever. Two contrasting elements reinforce each other. Balance is intimately related to contrast; it is the active relationship between opposed elements. If the balance (between blocks of colour, for example) is resolved, there is a sense of equilibrium in the image. If unresolved, the image seems out of balance, and a visual tension remains.

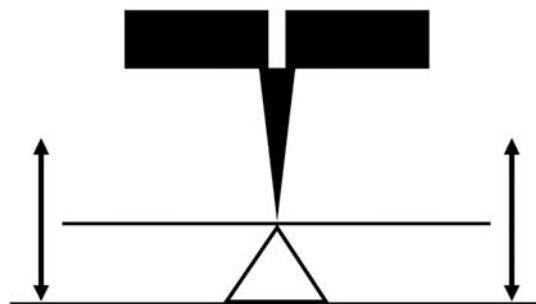
Contrast, of course, is essential to the reading of any image. One of its strongest forms is in a figure-ground composition, in which tonally contrasting areas occupy roughly equal areas. There are, however, circumstances when the photographer can choose which of two components in a view is to be the figure and which is to be the ground against which the figure is seen. This opportunity occurs when there is some ambiguity in the image, and it helps to have a minimum of realistic detail.



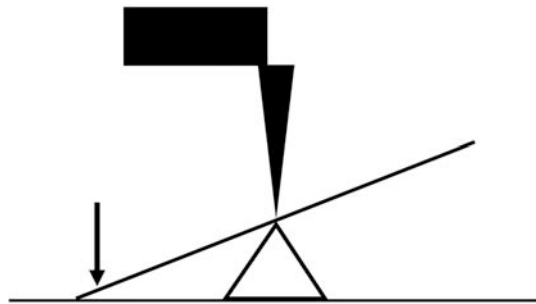
Another incidence of strong tonal contrast is when the lighting creates a sharp division between lit and unlit areas - chiaroscuro, in other words, as in the following image.



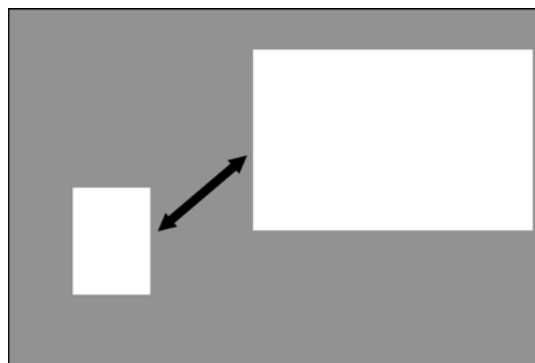
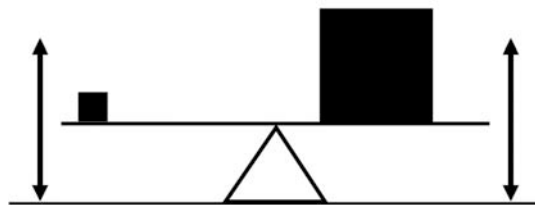
There is a natural tendency to apply our experience of gravity to images and image frames. Verticals express a gravitational pull downwards. Horizontal bases a supporting flatness. Among other things, this is probably why there the placement of a dominant element in a frame tends to be lower. Using the analogy of a weighing scale, think of a picture as balanced at its center. In this close-up of the eyes on the Buddhist stupa at Swayambunath in Nepal, the simple arrangement is symmetrical. The arrangement is balanced exactly over the fulcrum; the forces are evenly balanced.



However, if we remove one element, done here digitally for the exercise, the visual center of gravity is shifted to the left, and the balance is upset. The natural tendency would be to shift the view to the left.

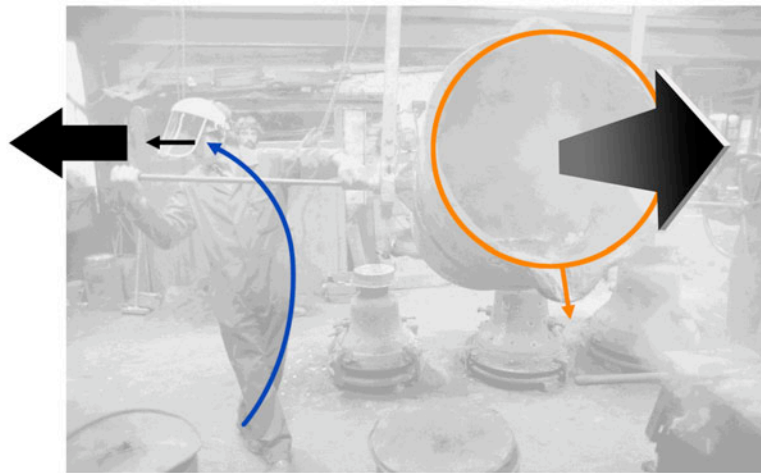


Dynamic equilibrium opposes two unequal subjects or areas. Just as a small weight can balance a larger mass by being placed further from the fulcrum, large and small elements in an image can be balanced by placing them carefully in the frame. Note here below that the content of the upper right area - Chinese characters - increases its visual importance.



However, rather than think of an image as balanced or unbalanced, we can consider it in terms of its dynamic tension. This is essentially making use of the energy inherent in various structures, and using it to keep the eye alert and moving outwards from the center of the picture. It is the opposite of the static character of formal compositions. Eye-lines and the way things appear to face are responsible here below for the diverging lines of view. The man faces left, and the line of his stance contributes to this. The hopper with

molten metal faces forward and to the right. The two pull against each other visually.



Both extremes, and all varieties of balance in between, have their uses in photography. The eye seeks harmony, although this does not make it a rule of composition. Denying the eye perfect balance can make a more interesting image, and help to manipulate a response the photographer wants. Effective composition is not committed to producing gentle images in familiar proportions. It is usually visually satisfying, but ultimately functional. It begins with the photographer having a clear idea of the potential for a picture, and of what the effect of the image should be.

**This is a sample from *Photography 3: Your Own Exhibition*. The full course contains 9 Projects and 5 tutor-assessed Assignments**